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Can I Borrow a Cup of Sugar?: Teaching with Collections from Digital Repositories

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Can I Borrow a Cup of Sugar?

Teaching with Collections from Digital Repositories

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NUTRITION INFORMATION

With so many digital collections from larger institutions and libraries widely available, smaller schools that lack physical access to rich special collections materials are still able to make use of them as a teaching tool.

This interactive session addresses critical thinking components and a deeper understanding of the relationship between a text and its thingness and how that relationship changes over time. Students explore how literature is commodified and consider how mass production changes our interactions with books. Being able to interact with the original form of the text, even in a digital format, can add to students' understanding of the themes of the class as well as why students still read these texts hundreds of years after they were first produced.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will be

- introduced digital primary source collections
- able to evaluate primary sources in order to identify the creator and intended audience of a text

- able to describe the difference between the original format of a text and the text they read in class
- able to critique primary sources with the socioeconomic and political conditions in which the texts were originally produced

RELEVANT RBMS/SAA JOINT GUIDELINES

3C, 4C

COOKING TIME

75 minutes

NUMBER SERVED

10–25. Divide the class, depending on size, into groups of 2 to 5 students. Students work together on the provided Curators' Worksheet (see figure 1) and the representative texts. The number of students in a class will determine the number of digital items needed, and the size of each student group may depend on the number of digital surrogates available.

INGREDIENTS

- A computer lab or laptops.
- Presentation system for students to

follow along with brief lecture on book history.

- List of basic book and manuscript terms, if needed. We recommend the fully illustrated "Glossary for the British Library Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts" (<https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/glossary.asp>).
- Curators' Worksheet (see figure 1).
- Digital surrogates of texts from the course. For a survey of British literature course, we used the following:
 - *Beowulf*. England, 4th quarter of the 10th century or 1st quarter of the 11th century, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV, The British Library Digitised Manuscripts. http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton_MS_Vitellius_A_XV.
 - Chaucer, Geoffrey. *Canterbury Tales*, ca. 1400–1410, mssEL 26 C 9, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. <https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll7/id/2838>.
 - *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. London, British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x. (art. 3): A Digital Facsimile. <https://cdm22007.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/gawain>.
 - Shakespeare's First Folio. The Bodleian First Folio: digital facsimile of the

Figure 1. Curators' Worksheet

You are part of a team curating an exhibit of your class [ENG207]. As a class, you will decide the theme or big idea of your exhibit (what it's about), your audience (who will view it), and in what order your items will be displayed. Then, your group will draft an exhibit label for your assigned text. You have read this text in class and will be familiar with it.

- ★ What did the class decide as the exhibit's theme? (This will help you think about what you want to say in your label and in what order you want items in the exhibit to be displayed, e.g., chronologically, by theme, by genre, by format.)

Use the following prompts to consider how you might write a label of your item for the exhibit.

Describing Your Item

It is a curator's job to tell the exhibit's viewers what's important or significant about the object in front of them. What is the story you want to tell visitors about what you learned this semester? How will you contribute to that story with your item?

Use helpful information from your item's metadata record, such as the date and description of the object. (That's the information before you look at the images.)

Author:

Title:

Date:

Is it a printed book?

Is it a manuscript, i.e., is it handwritten?

Which page will you display?

Why?

Thinking about Your Label

Time to draft your label! Take a moment to reflect on what you learned in class about this work. What was important about it? What are some of its literary themes? How does the physical (digital) object of the book or manuscript demonstrate those themes or what you have learned this semester?

Write your label on the back of this sheet.

First Folio of Shakespeare's plays, Bodleian Arch. G c.7. <http://firstfolio.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>.

- Donne, John. *Poems, by J. D. With elegies on the authors death*, 1633, G.11415. British Library <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/first-edition-of-john-donnes-poems-1633>.
- Sidney, Philip, *Syr P. S. his Astrophel and Stella. Wherein the excellence of sweete poesie is concluded. To the end of which are added, sundry other rare sonnets of diuers noble men and gentlemen*, 1591, G.11543. British Library <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/philip-sidneys-astrophil-and-stella-1591>.

PREPARATION**Course Overview and Session Context**

ENG 207: British Literature is a survey course for undergraduates at Misericordia University that introduces students to several canonical British texts from the ancient to early modern periods. The course explores how these foundational texts reflect changing values and intellectual movements in British culture.

Librarians meet with the students at the midpoint of the semester for an interactive instruction session to reconceptualize their assigned readings. Librarians use this session to introduce students to the original formats in which these texts were first produced, such as early printed books and manuscripts. Students can gain an understanding of the artifactual value such objects hold, as well as a recognition of how a text itself is transmit-

ted from its earliest form to the anthologies they may read from today.

For students who do not have access to special collections with manuscripts and rare books, librarians can use digital surrogates of original manuscripts and early printed books to allow students to curate an exhibit related to their course's themes similar to the activity in ENG 207.

Session Introduction

- Librarians begin the session by introducing a brief history of the book, including production, resources, and intended audience of texts produced during different historical periods. When the librarians lead a brief discussion after this lecture portion, students begin to differentiate between the texts they read and interact with in their classroom anthologies and the original texts. They also compare their experiences to the way in which contemporary readers would have interacted with these texts, particularly when considering social class and historical literacy rates.
- Before beginning the activity, librarians address a few basics about digital collections, including access, preservation, and the types of metadata available in objects' records. Students are encouraged to consider the differences between digital and physical items and the advantages and challenges of digital collections.

Classroom Activity

- After introducing digital collections and book history to students, librarians introduce the classroom activity. They challenge students to curate an exhibit for their course from a pre-identified set of digital surrogates, evaluating and contextualizing their books and manuscripts within the themes of their course.

As a whole, the class needs to

- choose a focus for the exhibit (a “big idea”)
- identify the audience (e.g., the campus community, faculty, public, etc.)
- determine in which order each item will be displayed (How will they tell the story of the exhibit?)
- Librarians divide the class into small working groups. The size of groups will depend on the number of students and digital surrogates available for the session. Once the class has been divided, the groups must come together as a whole to determine the overarching or organizing theme they will present in their exhibit (e.g., chronologically, specific themes they address in class, etc.). Depending on the size of the class, this may be done via ambassadors that each group sends or as a whole. This organizing theme should help direct each group's analysis of their digital surrogate.
- Each small group is assigned a specific digital surrogate of a text they have read in class. Using the Curators' Worksheet and metadata from the digital

collections' records, each group must identify the title of the work, describe the artifact, identify which page will be displayed, and outline a brief descriptive label that addresses the item's significance to the exhibit's theme.

During the activity, librarians and the instructor circulate through the room to address student questions or confusion. Students are allowed at least 30 to 35 minutes to complete the activity, leaving approximately 30 minutes for the class to come together and review their exhibit.

Class Debrief and Activity Review

- Each group reports on the decisions made concerning their item; this includes sharing their descriptive label and displaying their item to the class using the instructor's or presenter's station in the classroom. The class as a whole reviews and discusses the exhibit's arrangement.

During the discussion, students are encouraged to consider their own reactions as readers and consumers of literature to differences between manuscripts, early printed books, and their course's edited editions; why these specific works are still widely read and studied; and the impacts of digitizing canonical works in their early forms.

TASTE TEST

At the end of the session, the groups turn their worksheets in to the librarians, pro-

viding a formal assessment object. The worksheet will allow librarians to assess the second learning outcome. Students need to identify and describe their assigned digital surrogate, tying back to this outcome.

The third and fourth outcomes can be assessed using informal discussion and observation methods during the debrief or activity review. By posing questions to students, librarians encourage them to reflect on the topics these learning outcomes address.

Sample questions can include the following:

- How do these items differ from each other? (Examples include moveable type, illumination, woodcut illustrations, etc.)
- Compare this manuscript to your classroom text or anthology. What do you notice?
- How much do you think it cost to produce the manuscript? How much time would it take to create it? How much does your textbook cost? How long did it take to create it?
- Who is the primary audience for a manuscript? Who would have access to it? How many copies do you think were produced? How about for your classroom text?
- Where else can we find these texts today? (e.g., Amazon, bookstores, etc.)
- Why are these books and manuscripts considered important enough to save in museums?